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The Introduction of Sports in China

AURÉLIEN BOUCHER

The term *tiyu* can refer to Chinese traditional practices as well as “sports” as generally understood. While such a broad grouping of physical activities might appear surprising at first, it is not at all strange given the context in which sports were introduced in China.

From June 23 to July 15, 2007, China celebrated “Olympic culture” for the last time before the opening of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The 5th Olympic Culture Festival featured 110 physical activities in the form of demonstrations or exercises presented to the public through ceremonies and workshops themed “Sports for All.” Chinese martial arts, rope skipping, *jianzi*,⁽¹⁾ and bamboo dances took pride of place. Paradoxically, the organisers of the Chinese sports movement decided to celebrate non-Olympic activities in order to promote the ideals of fair play, competition, and fraternity that the Games champion. In China today, activities deemed “traditional” appear to have become fully assimilated with sports culture. This mixture of diverse physical activities subsumed under the label of sports seems relatively unsurprising, as a number of Asian disciplines such as judo and karate have also become associated with sports over the last century. This has led to the introduction of new rules governing the practice of these disciplines, as well as the organising of competitions. The confusion between sports and “traditional” disciplines is emblematic of the way in which the field of physical activities has been historically structured in China. It is pertinent at this juncture to review the historic process of introduction of sports in China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Contrary to the idea touted by the organisers of the Beijing Games,⁽²⁾ sports and Chinese physical activities were not originally structured according to the same cultural logic. Literally “imported” by a handful of people moulded by the Victorian era British educational models and North American entrepreneurial spirit, sports met with considerable opposition when introduced to China in the early twentieth century. This contrasted greatly with the situation around the same period in Europe, where sports and competitive activity that had been an exclusive preserve began to enjoy massive popular enthusiasm and grew rapidly. The Union of French Societies of Athletic Sports (USFSA), one of the main sports organisms in late

nineteenth century France, grew to consist of 350 clubs by 1903 and 170,000 members by 1913,⁽³⁾ and organised a national football championship as far back as 1896; no national competition took place in China, however, until 1910.⁽⁴⁾

A look at the archives reveals lively and highly representative accounts of Chinese attitudes and reticence during that period. In 1914, in a book entitled *America through the Spectacles of an Oriental Diplomat*, Wu Tingfang, who was an ambassador and minister during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and then Republican China, said:

Perhaps in nothing do the Chinese differ from their Western friends in the matter of amusements more than in regard to sports. The Chinese would never think of assembling in thousands just to see a game played. We are not modernized enough to care to spend half a day watching others play...I much doubt if [sports] will ever be really popular among my people. They are too violent, and from the oriental standpoint, lacking in dignity.⁽⁵⁾

1. The *jianzi* is a traditional Asian shuttlecock played somewhat like Badminton but using the feet and not the hands. It is thought to have originated in China in the fifth century BC.
2. He Zhenliang, one of the Chinese representatives in the International Olympic Committee, wrote in an article entitled “5,000 years of sport in China: art and tradition (Olympic Museum)” that, “With its origins in the Yellow River Valley, the Chinese civilization has its own time-honoured sports like all other ancient civilizations. Over the past five thousand years, the Chinese people have created a great variety of sports and games; some are now forgotten, and others are little known.” He Zhenliang, *Olympic Review*, 1999, Vol. XXVI, No. 27 pages 75-76.
3. See Jean-Michel Delaplace, *L'Histoire du Sport, l'Histoire des Sportifs: le Sportif, l'Entraîneur, le Dirigeant; 19ème et 20ème siècles; [Actes du 7ème carrefour de l'histoire du sport organisé à Montpellier]*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1999.
4. In 1910, the first national games were organised under the supervision of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). The participants, mostly drawn from universities, competed in basketball, football, athletics, and tennis.
5. Wu Tingfang, *America through the Spectacles of an Oriental Diplomat*, Frederick A. Stokes, New York, 1914, quoted in Andrew D. Morris, *Marrow of the Nation, A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 2004, p. 1.

Introduction of sports in China: teething problems

In the late nineteenth century, Chinese students returning from the United States and Great Britain brought back sports goods,⁽⁶⁾ thus helping to promote a few games among a still restricted circle of people. Apart from such isolated initiatives, the spread and organisation of sports remained under the control of Westerners, in particular members of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), until the 1920s. In fact, right from the late nineteenth century,⁽⁷⁾ the YMCA promoted sports activities in schools and organised a number of national and international competitions, and acquired a quasi monopoly on sports in China.

Until 1924, when the Chinese organised their national games in Wuchang against the advice of YMCA members, most competitions (inter-varsity meets, national games,⁽⁸⁾ or even the Far Eastern Championship Games⁽⁹⁾) were organised by foreigners, especially Americans.

The structures created by the YMCA preceded and guided the nascent Chinese national organisations, such as a regional athletics federation that the YMCA put in place in 1910, and which eventually (in 1919) served as the model for the China Amateur Athletic Union (CAAU). American domination in the organisation of competitive sports often continued through control of supposedly independent Chinese institutions. The CAAU was a case in point. Of the nine members of its first organising committee, six were foreigners, including two YMCA officials. The organisation of the Far East games that started in 1913 in China, the Philippines, and Japan was also indirectly a YMCA initiative through its control of the Far Eastern Athletic Association, which managed the games.⁽¹⁰⁾ The foreigners heading the bodies officially recognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) wielded a sort of monopoly over the way in which sports were conducted and competition was regarded. The locals gradually brought into these federations were hand-picked; only those who were converts to Christianity and influenced by higher studies in the United States took part in the formulation and direction of sporting events, thus subtly participating in the "civilising" and evangelising work of the YMCA. Such, for instance, was the case of Wang Zhengting, the Yale-educated Chinese diplomat who was present during the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 and became the first member of the IOC in 1922.



Using sports, the YMCA sought to impose modes of physical exercise enshrining values deemed Christian, universal, and characteristic of the "civilised world," such as love of one's neighbour and fair play. Much proselytising zeal accompanied the Christian organisation's promotion of practices associated in some Chinese circles with strength and modernity.⁽¹¹⁾ This can be seen from the statements of leading officials of the YMCA:

6. Such as footballs, table tennis sets, and baseball gear, among others. See Fan Hong and Tan Hua, "Sport in China: Conflict between tradition and modernity, 1840s to 1930s," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Volume 19, Issue 2 and 3, July 2002, p. 190.
7. Among YMCA leaders, the arrival in China of Willard Lyon in 1895, of Robert Gailey and Fletcher Brockman in 1898, and of Max J. Exner in 1908 were noteworthy. They introduced several games, including basketball.
8. Starting from 1910, the national games brought together members of sports clubs mostly affiliated to the YMCA for events featuring basketball, football, tennis, and athletics. The choice of disciplines and different categories (initially based on students' age) evolved over time, gaining pace after 1924, when wushu gradually made its entry.
9. The Far Eastern Championship Games took place once every two years between 1913 and 1925 in the three participating countries — China, Japan, and the Philippines — and featured tennis, swimming, baseball, athletics, football, basketball, and volleyball.
10. The role of Elwood S. Brown, YMCA director in Manila, and his collaborators Frank L. Crone and William Tutherly in the creation of the Far Eastern Athletic Association was noteworthy.
11. Speech of Fletcher Brockman, secretary of the YMCA in China, to the movement of voluntary students abroad: "Why shall I go to China? ... One reason is because a million a month in that great land are dying without God. Can you picture what it is to die without God? Can you imagine it? ... Another reason, because 300,000,000 in China are living without God. O brothers and sisters, can you picture what it is to live without God? Have you ever thought of it, to have no hope for the future and none for the present?" Quoted in Dong-jhy Hwang, *Sport, Imperialism and Postcolonialism*, University of Stirling, 2002, p. 70.

There are several things which these First National Athletics Games should accomplish. In the first place they will call national attention to physical training and will stimulate interest in it all over China. [...] and they will do much to remove prejudice against Christianity. They will win respect for Christianity, especially in the minds of young men, in that they will cause Christianity to be associated with virile, manly elements.⁽¹²⁾

This desire to evangelise⁽¹³⁾ and “modernise” China through the teaching of superior sports technique produced contrasting results. The Westerners, especially YMCA members, wrote about the hurdles they encountered:

More difficult to inculcate than the skills and rules were the meaning and the requirements of team play and sportsmanship, whether in victory of defeat. Team effectiveness rather than the display of individual prowess was a norm which had to be learned. It was not uncommon in the early days for the losing team and its schoolmates to seek retrieval of their lost face by launching bodily assaults on the winning team and its supporters!⁽¹⁴⁾

Difficulties in the development of sport and its ideals also had their origin in the fact that many types of physical education vied with each other in China. Thus, Japanese military practices and German *drill* introduced through military academies in Tianjin (in 1881 at the naval academy) and Nanjing (1875), or by students trained in Japan, lent particular support to physical education in the universities at the start of the twentieth century.⁽¹⁵⁾ Military-inspired private gymnastics clubs were founded as far back as 1903 (*Aiguo ticaohui* in Anhui), and regional university events featuring walking, running, and gymnastics were organised in Tianjin in 1898 and 1902, Shandong in 1903, and Nanjing in 1907. All these events drew their inspiration from Japan and Germany, which were divorced from Anglo-Saxon sporting ideals. The first strictly sports-based competition of any consequence, i.e., with participation by more than a hundred students, did not take place until 1910,⁽¹⁶⁾ and only after 1915, following a collaboration between the YMCA and five Chinese universities, did sports come to be seen as conducive to military education.

Thus the development of sports on a nationwide scale met no little resistance at the start of the twentieth century. While gradually more and more competitions were held,

attracting larger numbers of spectators, sports as such struggled to become a “normal” mode of physical education for the whole population.

Rediscovery and invention of “ancient sports” and “traditional sports”

Faced with these difficulties and the struggle for influence among types of physical exercises as captured in the columns of newspapers covering physical education, sports promoters sought mainly to propagate the view that far from being imported, sports were actually invented in China. They thus tried to ride on the nationalist wave of the 1920s in order to gain for sports the status of a legitimate form of physical exercise.

The two terms that best illustrate the deliberate construction or invention of a link between Chinese practices and sports began to appear in the 1910s, and are still used to categorise different forms of physical exercises: “ancient sports” (*gudai tiyu*) and “traditional sports” (*guocao tiyu*). These contrast with “modern sports” (*xin tiyu*), which refers to those activities not belonging to the same social and historic construction, but which nevertheless come under the category of “sports.” Naturally, this enlarging of the “sports” category is artificial and loses the original connotation by including ancient and traditional exercises. This becomes clear in reviewing the definition of sports given by Norbert Elias and reflecting on the nature of some traditional practices. Elias says:

All sport – whatever else it might be – is an organised group activity based on a competition between at least two parties. It requires a physical effort, which is engaged while respecting known rules that allow physical force but limit violence.⁽¹⁷⁾

12. Exner, quoted in Hwang, *Ibid.*, p. 74.

13. Thus, unsurprisingly, the Bible was among the elements included in the first course of the YMCA in Shanghai aimed at training sports teachers for schools.

14. Eugene E. Barnett, *My life in China 1910-1936*, East Lansing, MI: Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University, quoted in Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China, Sports in the Moral order of the People's Republic*, The University of Chicago Press, 1995, p.289.

15. Starting from 1903, military gymnastics were recognised as possible support for physical education through the decree *Xuewu gangyao* (military techniques training principle). In 1904 and 1906, decrees entitled *Zhouding zhongxue tang zhang cheng* and *Zhouding youji shifan xue tang zhang cheng* (relating to the programmes of colleges and schools) confirmed the legitimacy to the initiation of physical exercises in educational establishments.

16. See M. Tian and R.F.Tian, *Qing mo tiyu de fazhan* (Sports development in the late Qing era), *Nanjing tiyu xueyuan xuebao*, Vol. 18., n°2, April 2004.

17. (Translated from the French) Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Sport et civilisation, la violence maîtrisée*, Paris, Fayard, 2001, p. 212.

A *cuju* game

Such a definition reveals how much of effort is required to integrate Chinese traditional practices into the category of sports. One may consider, for instance, the ancient sport of *cuju*, which at first looks like a form of football, as it consists of sending a ball through a goal. However, this activity departs from the criteria of Elias by not entailing a rule-based number of players, a point corroborated by contemporary Chinese authors who have studied *cuju*. These authors have furthermore confirmed that the activity had no pre-determined rules, and that it was not structured around competitions, but indulged in during festivals.⁽¹⁸⁾ Similarly, martial arts as practiced in late nineteenth century, consisting of a master transmitting military skills to a student with no competition at stake, could hardly meet the socio-historic definition of sports as understood in England in the context of the “civilising process.” In fact, a deeper analysis of different practices termed “ancient” or “traditional” shows that they lack solid historic elements that could classify them as “sport.”

On the other hand, a historic examination of the conditions under which the classification “modern sports”/“ancient sports” appeared, and of the “rediscovery” or invention of the Chinese origins of sports, casts light on the underlying ideological context. The resistance faced in the early twentieth century by sports promoters, and the view of many Chinese people who considered the activities to be less than civilised and even barbaric, has already been noted. Moreover, for state orthodoxy, sports seemed a form of cultural imperialism in addition to other forms of economic or military domination. The rediscovery of the “Chinese origins of sport” was thus a means of embracing it while retaining a sense of national pride;⁽¹⁹⁾ rediscovering a forgotten activity did not present the same difficulties as adopting Western physical exercises. Furthermore, the very fact of “rediscovery” helped impute the weakness of the body, and hence that of the country, to the process of forgetting and abandonment.⁽²⁰⁾ Chinese culture itself was not being intrinsically questioned; quite the contrary, it was becoming the carrier of the seeds of regeneration, while Western or Japanese superiority was merely due to a set of circumstances and thus even more fragile.

The rediscovery of the Chinese origins of sport took the form of a call for national resurgence, for modernisation, and for adaptation that had become necessary in a context where social Darwinism fashioned the minds of the people. At the same time, it avoided foisting abruptness on a population that, apart from the Westernised elites of the treaty ports,⁽²¹⁾ remained deeply conservative and disinclined to upset “tra-



dition.”⁽²²⁾ This conservatism was by no means inimical to a re-evaluation of history in order to identify “barbarian influ-

18. Hai Ren, *Soccer in Ancient China*, North American Society for Sport History; Proceedings and Newsletter, 1987, p. 1.
19. Such initiatives of “rediscovery” can be illustrated through the example of Hao Gensheng, who tried to show the anteriority of a Chinese game, *Chuiwan*, to golf: “According to the ascertained dates of historical facts, the history of Chuiwan can be tentatively traced back to the year of 943 AD, while the earliest record of golf appeared only in 1457 AD. It shows a difference of more than five centuries. Since both golf and Chuiwan belong to the same type of game, after all there arises a question: which one is the originator? In this case, the priority of historical dates of the two games determines their relation of origin and development. Because the pottery painting of golf in Holland was about fifty years earlier than the first historical record of golf in Britain, the Japan Grand Dictionary of Sports asserts that “golf originated in Holland”. This formula of proof used to be valid. In the course of historical research, we have discovered that our Chuiwan was much earlier than golf both in Britain and Holland.” Hao Gensheng, *Physical Education in China*, Commercial Press, 1926, p. 28. Hao contented himself with making simple comparisons of the times when these activities appeared, without taking any note of the socio-historical context. He tried, in fact, in the words of Elias, “to attribute a long and respectable ascendance” to golf, without even analysing “why the rules and the particular conventions came to be put in place” or why the game “took this particular form.” Elias and Dunning, *Op Cit*, p. 208.
20. “The people of our nation are weary and spiritless, our bodies emaciated by disease. We trudge on towards death, and if we bother to find out why, we see that it is nothing else but the harm from our abandonment of tiyu [physical culture]. ... Alas! These deficient, weak, exhausted bodies – what in the world would happen if they were pushed into the unforfeiting competition of men in this evolutionary world of strong countries and strong physiques ?” Xu Yibing, Jinggao jiaoyujie, Tiyyujie, 20 April 1909, in Morris, *Op cit*, p. 2.
21. “More or less converted to the Westerners’ lifestyle, living in the treaty ports where an artificial prosperity prevails alongside the foreign presence, many Chinese intellectuals, and with them the school-going youth, will come to think that the salvation of China lies in the total rejection of all traditions and the systematic imitation of the West.” Jacques Gernet, *Le monde chinois, Tome 3, l’époque contemporaine*, Agora, Paris, 2006, p.66.
22. The attachment to tradition showed itself in the population’s zeal for the study of classics at a time when it had little interest in new things or in physical education. See on this point the studies by Christine Nguyen Tri or Xiaohong Xiao-Planes. Christine Nguyen Tri, *Les lettrés et la réforme éducative en Chine, Tang Wenzhi, directeur d’une école moderne (1907-1920)*, in Annick Horiuchi, *Education au Japon et en Chine, Les Indes savantes*, Paris, 2006, pp. 119-146. Xiaohong Xiao-Planes, *Education et politique en Chine, le rôle des élites du Jiangsu 1905-1914*, EHESS, Paris, 2001, p. 198.

ences” that might have led to forgetfulness and decline of civilisation. It was precisely such a re-evaluation and return to values from Chinese antiquity that was invoked in the works on sports history that appeared in the late nineteenth century, especially those by Wang Geng, Hao Gengsheng, or Guo Xifen. Wang Geng set out the role of sports in these terms:

Tiyu for society gives rise to the special characteristics shared by our nation's people since antiquity... [B]enevolence, righteousness, loyalty, honesty, and perseverance will flourish even more with the power of tiyu. ⁽²³⁾

Guo Xifen for his part concluded:

Western games emphasise rules and simply do not have this [Chinese] sort of grace and elegance. ⁽²⁴⁾

Hao Gengsheng (see footnote 19), Wang Geng, and Guo Xifen ⁽²⁵⁾ attempted to deconstruct in a crude manner the Western origin of sport in order to establish a Chinese anteriority. With this enforced Sinicisation, indulging in sports

no longer constituted a submission to barbarism but rather a celebration of national history. Sport thus pandered to the same feelings as military gymnastics.

This review of history sheds light on the two phases of reception of “sports” in China: sport initially faced resistance as a missionary undertaking by the YMCA and in competition with other physical exercises (notably Japanese and German). It was only in a subsequent phase, in the nationalist context of the 1920s and the “rediscovery” of its Chinese origins, that sport became a legitimate mode of physical exercises. It will be most interesting to keep this element in mind when analysing the manner in which China's traditional sports will be presented during the Beijing Games. •

• Translated by N. Jayaram

Caractères chinois

gudai tiyu

guocao tiyu

xin tiyu

古代体育

國操体育

新体育

23. Wang Geng, *Gonggong tiyuchang*, Zhejiang sheng jiao-yuting, 1931, Hangzhou, in Morris, *Op Cit.* p. 106.

24. Guo Xifen, *Zhongguo tiyu shi*, Shangwu yishuguan, Shanghai, 1919, (Reissued by Wenyi chubanshi, Shanghai, 1993).

25. Wang Geng was a former student of Charles Mc Cloy who used to be director of the normal school in Shanghai. Hao Gengsheng studied at the University of Springfield, in the United States, was director of YMCA in Hankou and then of YMCA for all of China. He was one of the first two Chinese people to take part in organising the third national games in 1924, supervised by YMCA.